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## We need some space. We need to talk.

Kalmia Elizabeth Strong  
*University of Iowa*

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WE NEED SOME SPACE. WE NEED TO TALK.

by

Kalmia Elizabeth Strong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Fine Arts degree in Book Arts  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Julia Leonard

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Kalmia Elizabeth Strong

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the  
thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in  
Book Arts at the May 2015 graduation.

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Sara Langworthy

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Sara Sauers

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Stephen Voyce

...il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.

Albert Camus  
*Le mythe de sisyphé*<sup>1</sup>

Make a map, not a tracing.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari  
*A thousand plateaus*<sup>2</sup>

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## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This thesis combines documentation of book, installation, and social art projects from 2012-2015 with reflections on intentions, influences, concepts, and questions.

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a project in itself; expository writing has always felt unsatisfactory, pained, and false for me, and I battle with it—and with myself—whenever doing it, even if I am successful in making an argument. This is one of the reasons that I make artists' books, installations, and events, why I make up words and string together clause after clause with parentheticals, commas, semicolons, and em-dashes before reaching, breathless, the definitive period.

This document attempts a middle ground by walking the line between my sense and process (layering, shifting piles, fragmenting and recomposing, self-effacing) and what is a legitimate and comprehensible documentation of my work.

My artist's statement, therefore, relates descriptions of projects I have worked on over the past several years, including the work comprising my thesis project, in combination with reflections on influence, intent, and concept—a sense-making for now, in the spring of 2015.

It is called: We need some space. We need to talk.

## CHAPTER I: WHAT THIS WORK CONCERNS, AND AN INITIAL DESCRIPTION OF APPROACH

My previous and ongoing research and practice addresses language, meaning, sincerity, presence, and interaction. What exists in discourse—between people speaking together in a room, between people silent together in a room, a written text in response to a printed text, the time-space between a person and a text in the moment of reading? This is a liminal, slippery space, impossible to fix or describe.

As subjects of creative inquiry, these are not something to represent. Rather they are something to participate in, to activate.

The products that emerge from this interest (whether objects, groups, spaces, and/or actions) are not intended to represent or document, but to be instrumental or generative, either in their making and/or their life in the world.

## CHAPTER II: LANGUAGE (I)

Let us begin with this poem:

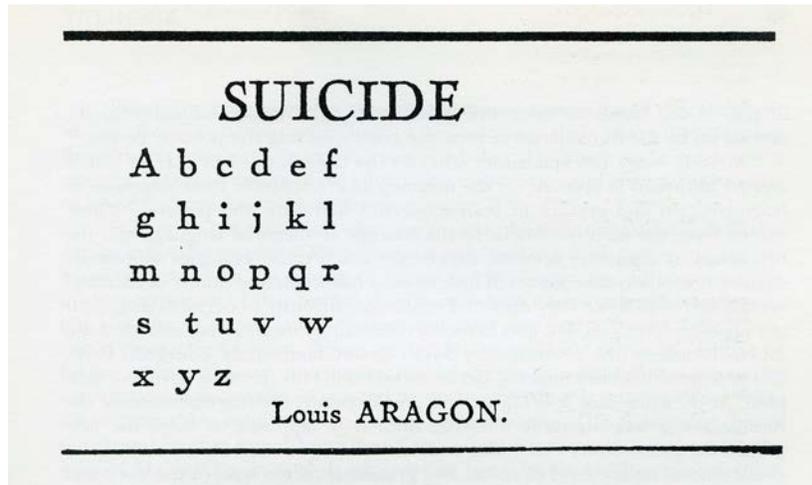


Figure 1. “Suicide” by Louis Aragon, as first published in *Cannibale* No. 1, 1920<sup>3</sup>

“Suicide” evokes the infinite possibility for meaning in language and the utter futility of fixed meanings. With this inevitable futility, then, is language any more than death? How do we explain what we are thinking, what we have done, what we plan to do, what we meant when we said what we said?

I approach it as Camus’ *absurd man*, who, in acknowledging this inevitable conflict, “says yes” instead of choosing suicide.<sup>4</sup> And, lest my questions seem too dark, Camus also wrote, in ending *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “we must imagine that Sisyphus is happy.” I do, and I am. There is great joy and fun in and alongside this difficulty.

I should note: for the purposes of this document, “language” refers to its many modalities: speech, writing, reading, printed text, manuscript, utterance, discourse, et cetera. I conflate them here because their relationships, overlaps, and divergences are a key source for my work.

### CHAPTER III: LANGUAGE (II), BOOKS (I), AND THEORY

In Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, "language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time."<sup>5</sup> Although I am inclined toward a deconstructionist critique of Saussure, this metaphor is too evocative to pass up, especially in regards to the book, for which the sidedness of paper is integral. Think of what balances in the near-imperceptible dimension of the thickness of a page! As Keith Smith writes in *Text in the Book Format*, the book is movement, "through time *in space*."<sup>6</sup> Walter Ong describes it as "less like an utterance, and more like a thing."<sup>7</sup> I see Ong's point but respectfully disagree. Yes, the book is an object, a thing, but it is also composed of moments. I am interested in working with these: its kinetic nature, the behaviors we learn and develop for reading and interacting with a book (or another text), the consciousness and intention with which it must be approached in order to be read or seen.

#### CHAPTER IV: THE INDEXICAL PRESENT AND LANGUAGE (III)

The artist and philosopher Adrian Piper describes and deploys the concept of the *indexical present*, which she explains as “what’s going on right here and now.”<sup>8</sup> (An indexical, in linguistics, is a word that points, or that changes meaning based on context, such as “today” or “now” or “you.”)

I had been approaching this idea in my own work, trying to figure out what it was, and Piper described it perfectly—if something innately temporary and elusive can be described perfectly.

To illustrate: if this thesis were a printed book and not a PDF, this manicule would point at the reader as you turn the page.



**Figure 2. A manicule/index/fist from the Zapfino digital typeface.**

## CHAPTER V: FUTILITY, FLUIDITY (I)

Once, when trying to describe my work, I wrote, “I seek to create things that experimentally prompt interaction and response in a way that I intentionally cannot control.”

## CHAPTER VI: BOOKS (II) AND SINCERITY (I)

I often build into my artists' books a certain live-ness or a self-consciousness of presence. This manifests in the process of making the book at times (as in *[conversation]*, in which hand-drawn graphite lines are the final element of a letterpress-printed multiple), but particularly in their reading, or, more broadly, their life-in-the-world.

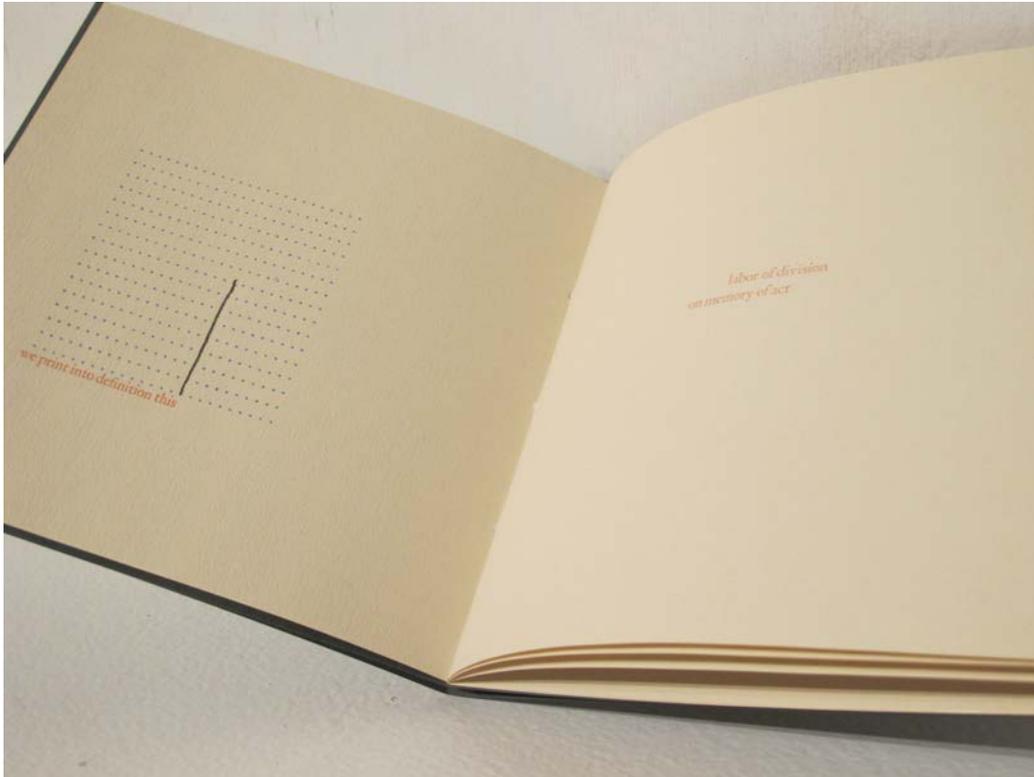


Figure 3. *[conversation]*, artists' book, 2014

My first attempt to work with the *indexical present* in the book format involved devising and deploying a “book for four,” binding four text blocks into a single unfolding cover piece. This set up a potential scenario of four individuals writing in the book while facing inward to form a square.

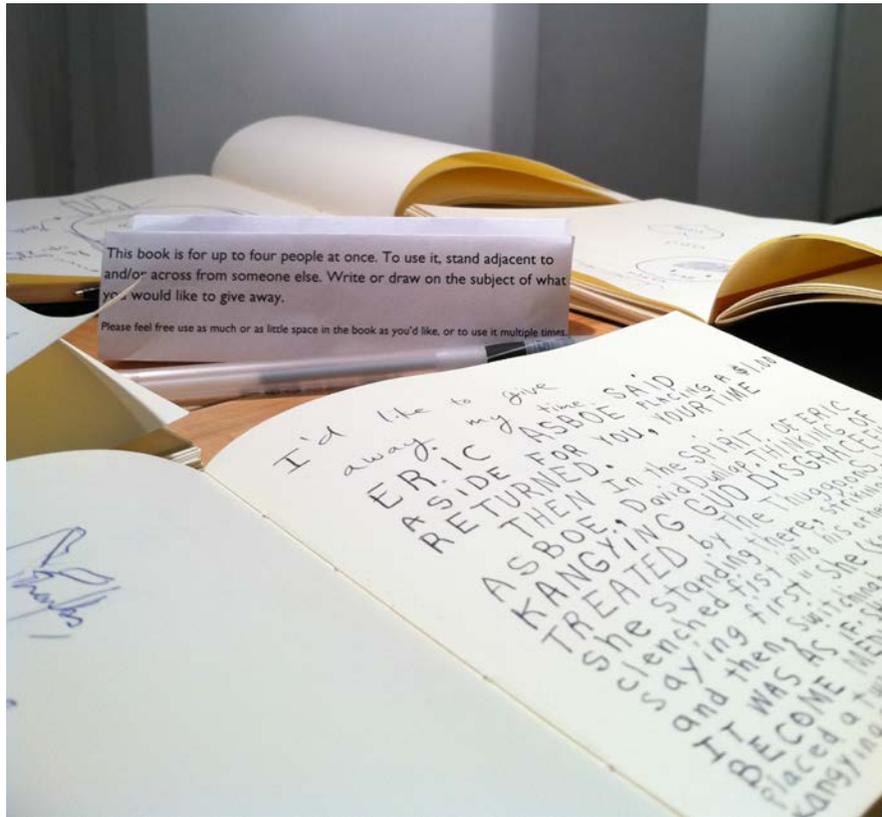


Figure 4. Book for Four, installed during the exhibition *Unfolding Structure* at Public Space One, Iowa City, IA, 2012

Piper's piece *Context #7* (see figure 5), was originally part of the Museum of Modern Art's 1971 Conceptual Art exhibition entitled *Information*. Recently, the Walker Art Center displayed pages from Piper's *Context #7* binder, hung in a line on the wall. My realization in seeing this was that what is important to me is the thing that you can't show in the museum, you can only *do* by participating in the work. While I value documentation and archiving, my disappointment in seeing the Walker's re-presentation of *Context #7* stems from my ongoing concern with sincerity in art that asks for interaction. How is it possible to overcome self-consciousness and sincerely participate in art that asks for interaction? How does an artist invite participation that has the possibility for genuine interaction?

Context #7

You (the viewer) are requested to write, draw, or otherwise indicate any response suggested by this situation (this statement, the blank notebook and pen, the museum context, your immediate state of mind, etc.) in the pages of the notebook beneath this sign.

The information entered in the notebook will not be altered or utilized in any way.

BRITISH LIBRARY

BOOKS

ROAD

GLoucester

Figure 1. First page of *Context #7*, by Adrian Piper (1971)<sup>9</sup>

## CHAPTER VII: GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

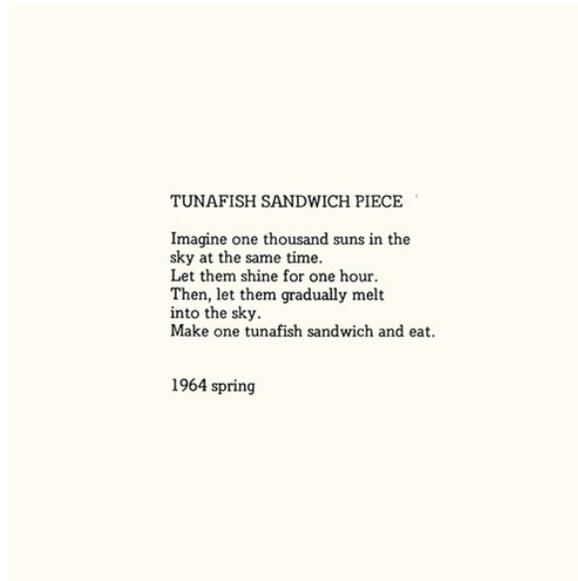


Figure 6. “Tunafish Sandwich Piece” by Yoko Ono<sup>10</sup>

As an event score, Yoko Ono’s *Tunafish Sandwich Piece* reads as a direct invitation to perform. Yet instruction is poetic, and the idea of undertaking it is mostly “imaginary and impossible.”<sup>11</sup> Very few are likely to sincerely attempt to perform in full the task as the score instructs, yet the reader (potential performer) cannot help imagining performing it, if only to arrive at its impossibility.

As an artist often hoping to make the viewer a participant, I wonder if it matters whether she

- sincerely and fully participates (and how to gauge sincerity of intention, which does not necessarily mean seriousness)
- imagines engaging in the activity, or
- just goes through the motions

Answering this may be impossible, but I am interested in the idea of “going through the motions” flipped from its connotation of rote, meaningless tasks. Can I use objects, habits, and learned skills (such as reading) to prompt activity and not worry about intention?

A codex, in its most basic form, prompts physical participation through its fold: open, close. Words ask us to read them.

## CHAPTER VIII: BOOKS (III)

My artists' books are typically short and spare, employing mostly text in tandem with minimal imagery and simple formal elements of the book object that present (ideally) subtle and gentle semantic and physical pauses or obstructions. The text often reads as a micro-manifesto – circular or referential in a way that points back to the moment, as in this page from *lunulae*.

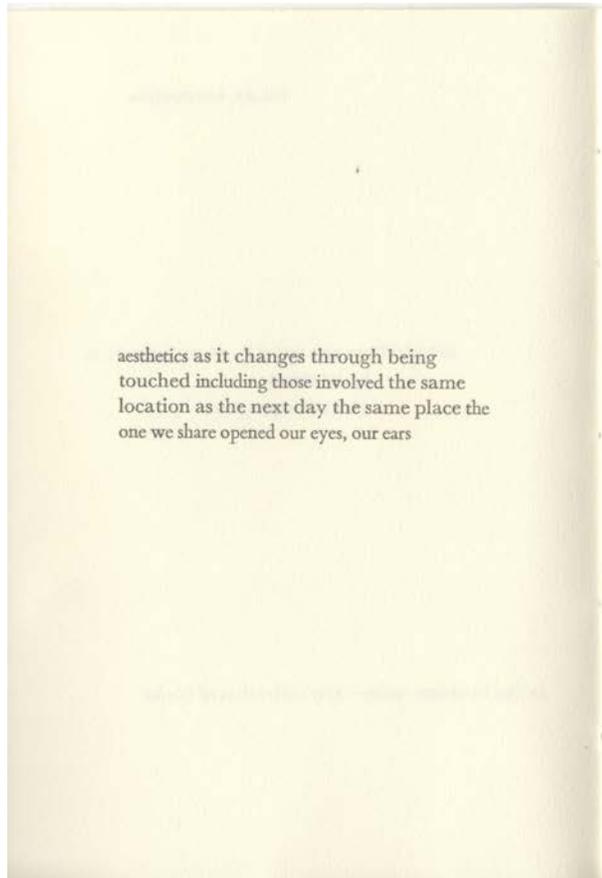


Figure 7: *lunulae*, letterpress-printed artists' book, 2012

*lunulae* is a textual assemblage using parenthetical phrases from four unidentified sources. Each source text is only demarcated using a slightly different serif typeface, rendering the book's text legible but slightly jarring or uncanny.

*Index*, the artists' book created for my thesis project, uses similar techniques but at a more ambitious scale. Each folio in the book exists as a single unit (the shortest possible codex, a sheet of paper folded once), and then, in combination with other folios, creates multiple possible codices.

Its components play upon modalities of language and create subtle invitations to interaction beyond a silent reading as receiver.

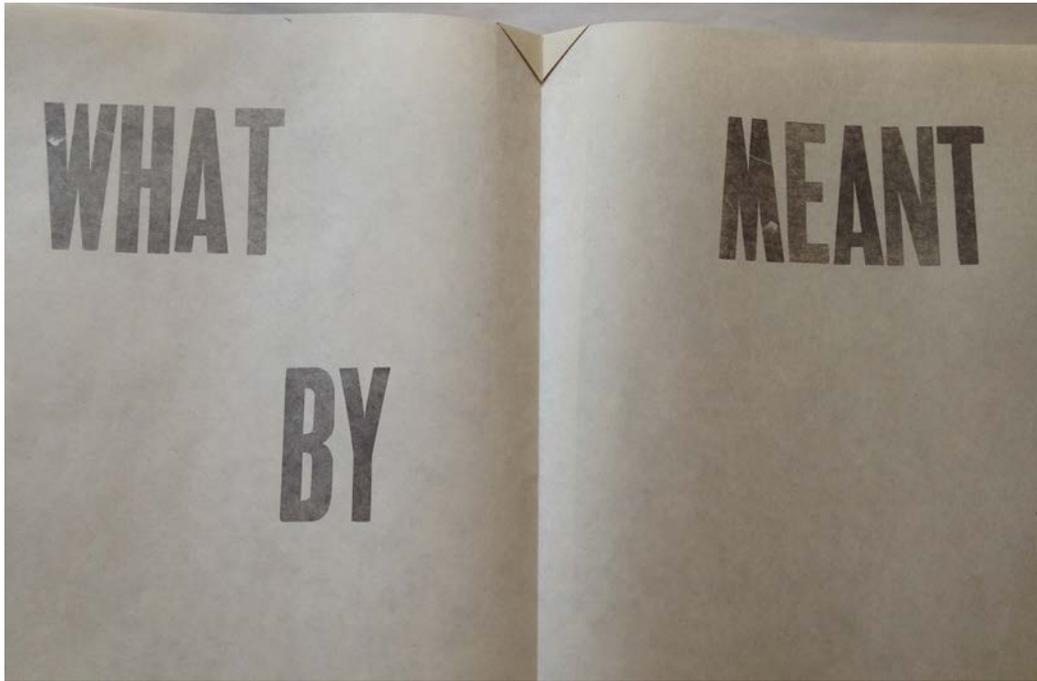


Figure 8. Spread from *Index*

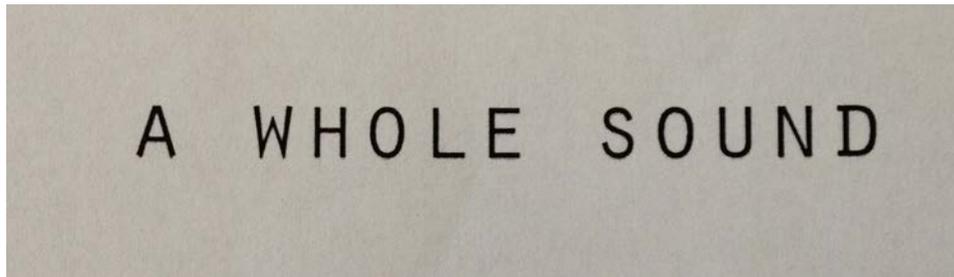


Figure 9. The Orator typeface, its name referring to its suitability for a text to be read aloud, from *Index*

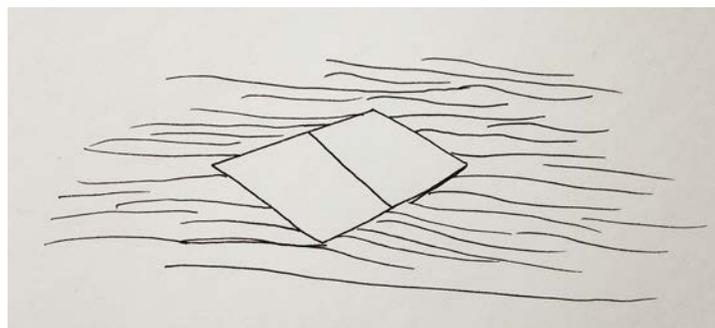
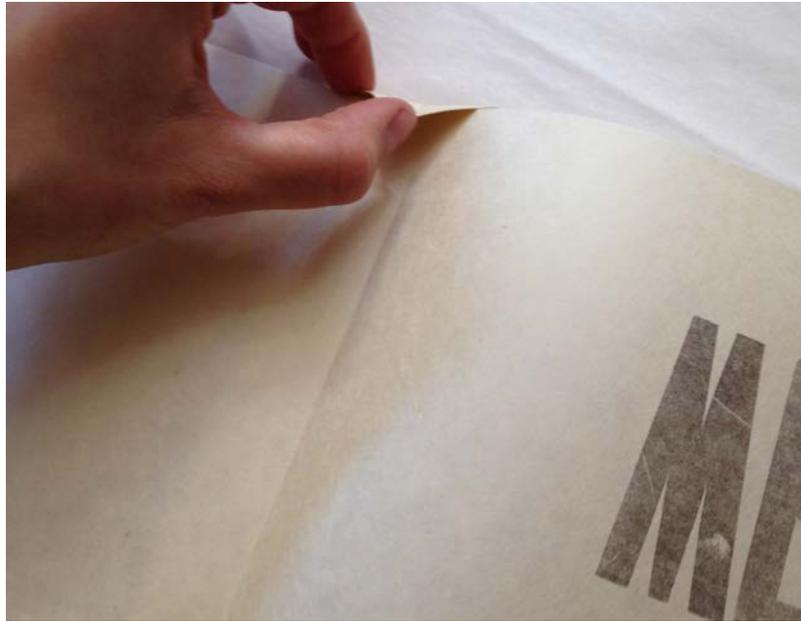


Figure 10. An iconic diagram from *Index*

Its “blizzard” or “crown” binding, devised by book artist and conservator Hedi Kyle, permits, and hopefully encourages, removal and rearrangement of folios (as well as potential editing, addition, or replacement). This binding and the multiple combinatory possibilities of the folios emphasizes the idea of the book as a container and is a reminder to question the idea of the book as a unified object by making physical Foucault’s description of the book’s “variable and relative” intellectual and social unity.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 11. Opening the blizzard binding**

## CHAPTER IX: LANGUAGE (IV) AND SPACE

The body, as a presence, as a carrier of language, as a maker of meaning, is an essential component of my inquiry.

*sentence* is a 100-foot-long hand-painted banner created in collaboration with John Engelbrecht. Its scale and installation make it impossible to read the ten-word text all at once; making the physicality of the act of reading overt and necessary. The phrases and words formed by its text are broken and shifting, depending on the viewer's recall, location, and direction.



Figure 12. *sentence*, installed at the Grin City Collective, Grinnell, IA, 2013 (view 1)



Figure 13. *Sentence* (view 2)

As part of my thesis work, I have continued to explore making ephemeral or temporary physical spaces for language both including and beyond the traditionally-sized book.

*Index* can be taken apart and spread out into the world.

Flagging tape printed over and over with signs of the indexical present (TODAY NOW HERE THIS YOU US) is both a symbolic and semantic obstruction.



Figure 14. *Untitled (TODAY NOW HERE THIS YOU US)*, silkscreen on plastic flagging, 2015

A tent is the creation of a temporary space, a context. It is a functional but collapsible structure. There is an obvious formal connection between the tent and the (codex) book; both possess balance and bisection created by a single fold. Tent-making is also the chance to play with the relationship between the iconic sign, the linguistic sign, the iconic object, and the physical object.

I am drawing on this particular tent, making marks until it is full. I am trying not to let the marks touch each other, so I must pay attention, work with intention. I invite others to mark as well; perhaps we will do so silently, or in conversation. The marks already made, both in their making and in the imagining of their making, point.



**Figure 15. Marks on the tent**



**Figure 16. Tent installation with drawing, 2014**

## CHAPTER X: FUTILITY, FLUIDITY (II)

There is no anticipated product, no message. My intentionality is detached slightly, like a vocable, an utterance without referent. Um. John Cage helps: “I have nothing to say and I’m saying it.”<sup>13</sup>

I work around and among phrases, structures, practices, and conversation. Objects and instances emerge from this, but they are always unfinished iterations, works to be worked upon, meanings to be built up and undone, functions to be used up or to fail.

By making objects or creating situations, I ask what will happen if we are asked to be, to act, to talk, to read, to interpret in a way or a space that is slightly unexpected. I propose a brief shift of attention to the here and now.

I get the word “propose” from the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark’s writing “We are the proposers”:

We are the proposers: we are a mould and it is up to you to blow in the meaning of our existence

We are the proposers: our proposition is the dialogue. We do not exist alone. We are at your mercy.

We are the proposers: we have buried the work of art as such and now ask you to let thought live through your action.

We are the proposers: we do not propose the past, the future, but the present, the here and now.<sup>14</sup>

## CHAPTER XI: THE LIBRARY

One final object: last year I acquired a wooden greeting card display from local thrift store Crowded Closet. Its substance as an object and its visual display appealed to me. As I work with a shifting and open group of collaborators, it is in the process of coming to life, a mobile site for distribution and production of small, cheap printed publications. I have found teaching and facilitating simple book-making and zine-making in varied workshop and informal situations to be transformative and impactful both for participants and for me, in thinking about what books can do. While I value the well-crafted, accessibility is crucial. As Aaron Cohick writes in the *New Manifesto of the NewLights Press*, “movement-between, not moving parts, is the key.”<sup>15</sup>

In library school, I learned S.R. Ranganathan’s five laws of library science. The first law is: “books are for use.”

It is important to me that this object be group-designed, be responsive to what use it can have for different people and different situations. One collaborator said that she thought it was a place for people to bring texts that they thought were very important. I have no grand vision for it beyond making it available and public, and in that sense, the project is more bringing it into existence and maintaining it as a functional object than it is the specific function(s) it has. That said, I see it as creating a temporary space for language and participation, albeit in a different mode than artists’ books or installations.

Self-publishing is also an obstacle: to traditions of discourse and expertise, to capital, to institutions. Because this library is on wheels, it can also quite literally get in the way.

I want to encourage this.



Figure 17. The library with its first batch of publications, February 2015

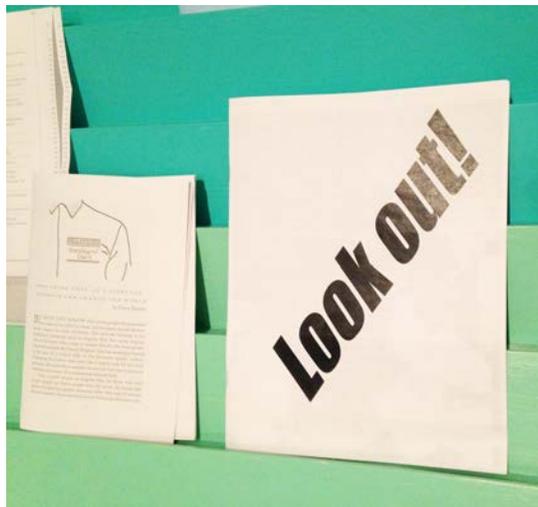


Figure 18. Detail of the library contents, February 2015

## CHAPTER XII: LANGUAGE (V) AND POLITICS AND SINCERITY (II)

Why propose? Why create obstructions and awkwardness, however gentle? Why struggle to engage with an impossible language, and share that struggle, running the risk of incomprehension and thus disengagement? And finally, is it fair for me to wriggle out of espousing a message (see Chapter X)?

I do not always succeed. I make multiples. I bind books and hand-print using obsolescing technologies, creating objects of value while professing to value ephemerality. I create situations that encourage people to work together, to be present together, to show up, and to create more obstacles. I cannot deny that there are politics here, that there is some direction. I take the artist collective Antena's *Manifesto for Discomfortable Language* as one guide:

Participation in a complex intellectual and political dialogue with many different kinds of readers/thinkers/speakers is a slower, less visible kind of change than other forms of agitation. We believe uncomfortable language is its own form of activism or (dis)organizing—disorganizing the structures of institutionalized non-consensual domination and subservience that are embedded in the textures of our language.<sup>16</sup>

Hakim Bey also gives a more political answer to Aragon's poem:

language can overcome representation and mediation, not because it is innate, but *because it is chaos...* Chaos Linguistics happily agrees, but adds that language can overcome language, that language can create freedom out of semantic tyranny's confusion and decay.<sup>17</sup>

I will admit that I place a lot of hope in language, in temporary spaces, in creating possibilities.

## CONCLUSION

This is where I am right now.

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